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AUTHOR Wheeler, Patricia
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ABSTRACT

This paper provides guidelines for improving the objectivity, quality, and relevance of classroom observations. Suggestions are organized according to the three stages of the observation process--prior, during, and after the observation. Tips for establishing and maintaining a positive climate and for necessary preparations prior to the observation are grouped into four areas: scheduling; preparing the observer; preparing the teacher; and preparing the students. During the observation, the following practices will increase the quantity and quality of data: attending to classroom activities; recording information; and collecting objective information. After the observation, it is important to complete the documentation and follow up with the teacher. Other recommendations include holding several formal and informal teacher evaluations throughout the year, utilizing multiple information sources, and retaining all documentation. Two tables and two figures are included. (LMI)

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Patricia Wheeler, Ph.D.

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IMPROVING CLASSROOM OBSERVATION SKILLS: GUIDELINES FOR TEACHER EVALUATION

Patricia Wheeler, Ph.D.
EREAPA Associates
Livermore, California

Classroom observations are the most frequently used method for evaluating teachers. Based on his national survey of over 900 school districts, Bickers (1988) found that 99.8% of the districts used direct classroom observation to evaluate their teachers and that, in almost all cases, the observations were done by the principal (95.3% in elementary schools, 93.4% in junior high schools, and 90.8% in senior high schools).

Classroom observations can have a strong impact on personnel and professional development decisions in a school. Therefore, it is critical that they be conducted in the best manner possible so they can lead to rational and fair judgments about a teacher. McGreal (1988) points out that, "The impact of observation data on administrative-teacher relationships is directly related to the way data are recorded during observations. (Observers must learn to record descriptively rather than judgmentally and should be introduced to the different types of observation instruments available.)" (p. 21). Wood (1992) emphasizes that evaluations of teachers can be more objective if principals "become more aware of and admit to the manner in which their own experiences may tend to slant what they see and hear" (p. 59). Wood encourages the use of naturalistic observations in which the context of the lessons or interactions is considered, observation and evaluation are seen as processes rather than outcomes, and the observer makes a serious effort to see events from the perspective of the teacher.

Observation is the primary tool for gathering evidence and notes for later use for analyses, decisions, judgments, and evaluations. None of these activities should occur during the observation. Forms such as checklists, rating scales, and evaluation reports should be completed after the observation using the evidence and notes collected during the observation and, when appropriate, other data sources and information. Completing these forms during the observation distracts the observer from the primary task at hand. This practice can result in missing key behaviors or events in the classroom, in making judgments based on one or two occurrences of such behaviors or events rather than on typical behaviors and events over the full observation period, and in not having specific evidence and notes needed to justify the data on such forms.

Since classroom observations are a key part of evaluating teachers, it is important that they be done in a sound manner. This paper provides guidelines for improving the objectivity and quality of classroom observations and for increasing the quantity of relevant information collected. This paper does not address the various types of observation systems. The reader should see other documents such as Hirabayashi and Wheeler (1992), Stallings and Mohlman (1990), or Stodolsky (1990) for more information on this topic. Whatever type of observation system is used, the primary activity during the observation period should be collecting evidence and notes. Typically, observation materials from school districts and state agencies contain forms to be completed and procedures for completing and processing the forms, but little or no information accompanies these forms on how best to collect evidence and notes during the observation.

Several factors can affect the completeness, objectivity and accuracy of a classroom observation and should be considered when conducting observations. These include: (1) observer characteristics (e.g., training and experience in doing classroom observations, teaching experience),

(2) the setting in which the observation is conducted and how well the observer can perceive what is happening, (3) the impact of the observer's presence on the behavior of students as well as the teacher, (4) omission of potentially important evidence and notes, (5) the degree of understanding about what aspects of teaching are to be observed, (6) focusing on a single view or style of teaching or on a rigid theoretical base of teaching, (7) a lack of objectivity during the observation, and (8) the tendency to make judgments rather than collect evidence and notes.

If the guidelines and suggestions provided below are followed, observers should be able to reduce the level of error while conducting the classroom observations and to improve both the quantity and quality of the data that is gathered. The guidelines are organized into the three stages of the observation process: prior to the observation, during the observation, and after the observation. Steps and activities during all three stages are critical to sound observation practices.

Prior to the Observation

Before conducting the classroom observation, it is important to establish a positive climate and a feeling of trust between the observer and the teacher. Be sure the teacher understands the purpose of the observation and is informed about the plans for conducting the observation. There is no reason to add the element of surprise by walking in unannounced or by misinforming the teacher about the purpose of the observation. Such practices are apt to result in less typical levels of performance and behaviors by the teacher and to promote a climate of mistrust. They do not provide a good basis for using observation results in a sound manner for personnel decisions and for improvement of teachers.

Suggestions for establishing and maintaining a positive climate and for necessary preparations to do observations are listed below. These are grouped into four areas: scheduling, preparation by the observer, preparing the teacher, and preparing the students.

Scheduling

If this is one of several observations of an individual teacher to be done during the year, plan to schedule the observation during different months and at different times of the day so that different subject areas and, when possible, several groups of students can be covered by the observations.

Schedule the observation at a mutually agreed upon date and time. Set an alternate date and time should the first one be canceled.

Do not schedule the observation on a day just before or after a holiday, vacation period or major school activity. Be sure the teacher has not scheduled a field trip, guest speaker, film, testing, or other special activity for the observation period.

Preparation by the Observer

If the observer has not used the observation materials before, complete a thorough training program on the observation system; do a trial run and practice. Time should be available to make any needed revisions in the forms or procedures, or to obtain clarification before doing the first scheduled observation. If substantial revisions are required, the observer should do a second practice run or a pilot test.

If the observer has not done any observations recently, practice note-taking. Use a videotape of a teacher conducting a lesson or a television program.

Collect as much data and information in advance as possible so the observation can focus on events and behaviors as they occur in the classroom rather than on the context of the teaching. Examples of such information are listed below. A sample observation cover sheet for recording such information is provided in Figure 1.

Information on the teacher:

Teacher's name

Employment status (probationary, long-term substitute, mentor teacher)

Subject/grade level assignment

Type of credentials held (permanent, multiple subject, provisional, bilingual)

Information about the students and classroom setting:

Number of students (present in classroom, total number taught)

Student characteristics (grade levels, degree of English language proficiency, academic ability levels, ethnic groups, disabilities)

Other adults and older students present

Physical setting (kindergarten classroom, computer lab, woodworking shop)

Grouping of students (whole class, six groups of four-five students each, students working individually)

Activity during the observation (biology lab on plant cells, language arts class on writing poems, band sight reading two marches, math activity on multiplying decimals)

Information about the observation:

Name of the observer

Date of observation

Start and end times of observation

Building and room

Purpose of the observation

Review all forms and materials at least one day before the observation. Be thoroughly familiar with the domains, elements, and indicators to be covered by the observation so that none of them are overlooked.

Make a list of all the materials needed to do the observation. Have everything together before the observation time (e.g., recording forms, pencils, watch, clipboard, the list of domains and elements covered by the observation).

Preparing the Teacher

Be pleasant and tactful, friendly and firm, but remain neutral and fair throughout the entire process.

Be open and informative about the purpose of the observation. Point out the mutual benefits of the observation and evaluation to both parties.

Consider holding a pre-observation conference with the teacher to establish lesson content and instructional objectives, the extent of student familiarity both with the concepts and skills to be covered and with the instructional approaches to be used, and any unusual circumstances that could affect the observation. In some cases, it may be more appropriate or feasible to obtain such information through a questionnaire.

Let the teacher know if copies of any materials will be needed as part of the observation record (e.g., student worksheets, instructions for an activity, copies of materials read in class).

Listen to what the teacher has to say about the observation and make a record of the teacher's comments, questions, and concerns. It is important to alleviate the teacher's anxieties about the observation. Respond to the teacher's requests for a classroom visitation/observation and for feedback on topics of concern to the teacher.

Clarify what follow-up activities will occur, whether or not there will be a debriefing with the teacher, and what type of feedback will be given to the teacher.

Be sure the teacher is aware of who will have access to the observation data and information and how they will be used.

Preparing the Students

Visit the classroom two or three days before the observation so that you will not be a stranger to the teacher or the students. At the same time, you and the teacher can decide where you should be during the observation and how you can move around the classroom so as to minimize disruptions to class activities while gathering evidence and notes.

During the Observation

The following practices will increase both the quantity and quality of the evidence and notes collected during the observation period.

Attending to Classroom Activities

Keep your eyes, ears, and mind on your task. Do not interact with students or others in the classroom. Refer students to the teacher, or to an aide if one is present. Do not challenge or criticize the teacher during the observation except in cases of life-threatening situations.

Look up regularly. It can be easy to spend time listening to what is going on and looking at the note pad, in which case much evidence will be overlooked or missed.

Recording Information

Ensure that key information is recorded on each piece of paper, including the name of the teacher and of the observer, the date, and the location. Since these will remain the same throughout the observation period, it can be done in advance on each sheet of paper or form. Every time the observer starts a new sheet, record the time and the setting (e.g., students in groups of four, students working individually at desks). This practice will enable the observer and others to follow the flow of activities in the class. A sample of a form for taking notes during an observation is shown in Figure 2. The key information at the top of each note-taking form is needed in case sheets later become separated. The category column can be used afterwards in accordance with the purposes of the observation. This could be a code for the domain or element observed, a rating of the relevant behaviors, or the type of evidence (positive, neutral, negative).

Use abbreviations as much as possible. Have a master list of standard abbreviations so that both the observer and someone else can interpret the observation notes later. A list of suggested abbreviations comprises Table 1.

On the first page of the notes, make a sketch of the layout of the classroom. Label key areas of the room and use the labels in the notes to describe locations and movement within the room.

Use a system for recording information about location. For example, instructions written on the chalkboard could have a rectangle drawn around them; math calculations shown on the overhead projector could have a square around them.

Do not keep recording the same behaviors and events repeatedly. A tally will usually suffice, although exceptions should be noted. For example, if the teacher asks individual students to spell such animal words as "dog, cat, cow, hippopotamus, horse, fish" the observer could make six tallies, but note that the teacher asked a certain student to spell "hippopotamus," whereas the others were asked to spell one syllable, familiar animal names. Depending on the domains and elements being covered, it may be necessary to indicate which students were asked to spell which words.

Collecting Objective Information

Collect both evidence and notes, and make the documentation of them as objective, complete and specific as possible. Include quotes of what the teacher and students are saying. Use quotation marks when not paraphrasing what is being said. Examples of evidence and notes are provided in Table 2.

Refrain from quick judgments. This makes it easier to collect objective and full records of behaviors and events in the classroom. Therefore, collect both positive and negative evidence and notes. Do not make an early judgment about the teacher and then record only evidence and notes that support that judgment. Negative information can help good teachers improve. Positive information can provide encouragement and reinforcement to teachers having difficulties and will help them build on their strengths.

Consider a technique for designating brief comments or thoughts during the observation that are secondary to the primary purpose of the observation and the activities being observed. These could be written on the back of the sheet (but don't forget them later), as a footnote on the page, or in a different color pencil.

The observation should be of sufficient duration to obtain adequate evidence and notes for later use. Generally, this will mean at least 30 minutes or a full class period at a minimum.

If the observation period is disrupted, make a record of this. Include information on the nature of the disruption, what was happening in the classroom at the time, who was affected, and how much time was lost.

After the Observation

It is important to continue working on the observation documentation immediately following the observation period in order to have the most complete and accurate notes possible. Suggestions for activities following the observation are listed below.

Completing the Documentation

Do not make any comments about the quality of the teaching or give other immediate feedback to the teacher. Analysis, decisions, judgments, and evaluations should be based on a careful review of

the data and information from the observation and other sources after the classroom observation has been completed.

Immediately after the observation, go over the written notes carefully. Expand on non-standard abbreviations. Add relevant, mentally-registered data that were not written down during the obervation. Fill in missing details. Ensure that the handwriting is legible. Do not put this task off or you may forget or misrepresent what was happening in the classroom.

Make the documentation as complete as possible both in terms of the quantity and the diversity of evidence and notes collected. Be sure to provide documentation for all applicable domains covered by the evaluation, or, if there is no evidence or notes for a domains, indicate that there was no opportunity to observe behaviors and events in that domain.

Ensure that the evidence and notes are recorded in a non-judgmental manner. They should be as objective and as specific as possible to aid the person using the results, who may be someone other than the observer. Someone else should be able to use the documentation to reconstruct what was happening, the nature of the lesson, the context of instruction, the strategies used, the sequence of activities employed by the teacher, and relevant teacher and student behaviors.

Complete all forms and reports as soon as possible so that there are evidence and notes related to all domains or areas covered by the evaluation. The sooner this is done, the more likely it is that missing information can be accurately included in the observation notes. Do this before observing another teacher so that mingling evidence and notes is avoided.

Protect the privacy rights of the teacher and others in the classroom by releasing documentation and information only to authorized individuals.

Retain a written record of the observation. Do not send the only copies of the documentation to another office; it is costly to have to repeat an observation and complete the forms and reports.

Follow-up with the Teacher

If you need additional materials from the teacher related to the activities during the observation (e.g., copy of the previous night's homework assignment), arrange to collect them promptly.

Often, the teacher's rationale for choices of behavior can be as telling as what was happening in the classroom (e.g., the reason for not correcting a student's wrong answer or for never calling on certain students who kept raising their hands). A short debriefing should be held with the teacher at the end of the observation period to allow both the observer and the teacher an opportunity to clarify certain behaviors and events.

Provide feedback to the teacher as soon as practical after the observation. Encourage the teacher to comment on the observation report. Document the teacher's reactions and concerns.

Focus feedback on strengths (areas for reinforcement and encouragement) and weaknesses (areas for growth and change). Be firm, helpful, specific, and supportive.

Conclusions

Personnel and professional development decisions should not be based on a single observation of a teacher. Several observations should be made, both formal and informal ones, in different classroom settings (subject areas, student groups) across the school year. In addition, other information about the teacher should be utilized in making decisions about the teacher's performance. Teachers do not assign grades based on only one forty-five minute activity of an individual student; they collect a variety of information about each student across the school year. This same practice of using multiple sources of information on a teacher's performance, collected across the school year, should be applied when evaluating teachers (see Wheeler, 1992, for

examples of data sources other than classroom observations). These can include observations of the teacher in other work-related settings (e.g., at a professional development session, at a PTA meeting, while on lunchroom duty, while overseeing a student extracurricular/sports activity).

Retention of readable and complete documentation, including observation notes, completed forms, evaluation reports, comments and reactions of the teacher, and feedback notes, is important. Such documentation can be useful in planning professional growth for the individual teacher, in determining professional development needs for individual teachers or for the entire staff, and in making and justifying personnel decisions based, in part, on classroom observations.

The costs associated with doing scripted observations, such as described in this publication, and with using additional data sources when evaluating teachers can be high. However, the benefits of quality evaluation practices and of appropriate professional development programs as well as the ability to make rational and fair decisions and to justify them at a later time must be considered in assessing the costs of such a system.

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FIGURE 1

Sample of Observation Cover Sheet

Name of Teacher: _____

Date of Observation _____ 19_____

Start Time _____ End Time _____

Name of Observer _____

Purpose of Observation_____

Teacher:

Employment status _____

Credential(s) held _____

Job assignment _____

Students:

Number of students in classroom _____ Number absent _____

Total number of students taught _____

Grade levels of students: ____ in Grade ____; ____ in Grade ____; ____ in Grade ____

English proficiency level: Number of students who are Fluent____ Limited____ None ____

Diversity: Number of Females _____ Number of Males _____

Number of primary language groups in class observed _____

Number of ethnic groups in class observed _____

Number of students in major ethnic groups:

African American	____	White	____
Asian American	____	Other: _____	____
Latino	____	_____	____
Native American	____	_____	____

Number and types of students with special needs:_____

_____

Setting:

Other persons present (number and type) _____

Grouping of students _____

Type of setting _____

Special equipment present _____

Activity:

_____

Instructional objective _____

Materials/equipment to be used _____

FIGURE 2

Sample Observation Form

Teacher _____ Page ____/____

Observer _____ Time _____

Date _____19_____ Setting: ___ No change

Location _____ Changed to _____

Time	Evidence/Notes	Category

Comments, Thoughts:

TABLE 1

Suggested Abbreviations for Use in Classroom Observations *

People		Facilities and Equipment	
T	Teacher	dk	Desk
S	Student	tdk	Teacher's Desk
Ss	Students	ch	Chair
3Ss	Three Students	tbl	Table
IA	Instructional Aide	bb	Bulletin Board
PT	Peer Tutor	cb	Chalk Board
Vol	Volunteer	OP	Overhead Projector
PV	Parent visitor	PA	Public Address System
B	Boy	cmp	Computer
G	Girl	bc	Book Case
B-ys	Boy in yellow shirt		
Grp 1	Group One		
B-L,LEP	Boy, Latino, limited English proficiency		
G-AsA	Girl, Asian American		
B-AfA	Boy, African American		
5Ss-Wh	Five white students		
G-Grp 2	Girl in Group Two		
Materials and Tools		Other	
tbk	Textbook	w/	With
wbk	Workbook	#	Number
lbk	Lab Book	=	Equal
calc	Calculator	Q	Question
pr	Paper	A	Answer
wst	Worksheet	fdbk	Feedback
qz	Quiz	info	Information
pcl	Pencil	intro	Introduce, Introduction
		demo	Demonstrate, Demonstration
		expl	Explain, Explanation
		assgn	Assign, Assignment
		hw	Homework

* Derived from Poggio, Burry, & Glasnapp (1988-1989); Wheeler & Page (1990).

TABLE 2

Examples of Evidence and Notes from Observations

Evidence - Documentation and verbal statements describing behaviors and events that occur during the observation period.

Good Examples -

T asks B-gs to distribute graph pr to each group. B-gs does quickly without add'l instructions from T.

T sends 4Gs + 2Bs to IA for help with hw.

T checks for understanding; asks 7Ss to answer 7Qs on cb. All 7Ss answer correctly.

T asks: "Why do you think Bill felt sad when he heard the news?" A from G-bd, "Because he liked John so much when they played on the same team."

T refers to Soc Stds lesson: "Remember last week in social studies when we learned that volcanoes are found on Hawaii and people like to visit them? Well, now, in science, we are going to learn how volcanoes can form islands."

Bad Examples - (too little information, unclear documentation, judgmental)

T gives incomplete answer to S's Qs on Chapter 6 reading.

T gives good expl that Ss understand of why electric current doesn't go through the circuit.

T asks Qs that make Ss think about the story.

T passes out mtls for sewing activity.

T sends pr with S to . . . .

Ss in trumpet section having trouble reading trio of march. T ignores them.

Notes - Information recorded about the setting, activities, materials, and context, and inferences supported by evidence to aid in clarifying and interpreting evidence.

Good Examples

Ss seated at round tbls, in 6 groups of 5, diverse by gender and ethnicity.

T cannot be seen by Ss at back tbl when working on far left of cb. Ss ask T to read what he wrote on cb.

T had enough rulers for each S, but only had graph pr for 24 of 32 Ss.

Boxes of supplies on bc labeled. Ss able to find items they need.

T took 7 minutes to take lunch count, collect $.

T pointed to bb display of excellent math homework.

T calls out names of 5Ss-L,LEP to go from Area D to work w IA in Area B. 3Gs + 1B go immediately; 1 B-ys does not move. IA goes to B-ys' dk and taps him on shoulder.

Bad Examples -

T's handwriting hard to read.

Colorful, but distracting bb.

Ss usually paying attention.

T has good attitude toward subject.

T doesn't interact well with Bs.